

## **URIM AND THE LITERATURE-REVIEW MODEL OF RESEARCH**

### *URIM DEFINED AND DESCRIBED*

Most guides to introductory-level humanities research recommend approximately the same research procedure. It is a generic library research procedure, suitable for investigating nearly any topic in nearly any field. I call this the Universal Research and Inquiry Method (URIM). In its simplest form URIM looks something like the procedure listed below.

#### Universal Research and Inquiry Method (URIM) Based on the Literature Search Model of Research

##### Part One: Define Problem

1. Select/define an initial topic. This may be narrow or broad, esoteric or mundane, advanced or novice. It should fit your interests and abilities, and meet course requirements or address real world needs.
2. Read at least two reliable summary discussions of your topic. These may be brief treatments such as are typically found in encyclopedias or other reference works. But you may read entire books at this stage.
3. Organize your thinking and formulate a specific research-worthy question about the topic. Write a tentative, brief outline to guide your study.

##### Part Two: Build Bibliography

4. Now that you have a specific question, build an adequate bibliography using the library catalog, databases, and specialized tools. Examine the main works you have found and check their bibliographies. Take special care to include recent works and diverse viewpoints. Perhaps use software to manage and format your citations.
5. Evaluate credibility of sources and authors in a preliminary way by using book reviews and biographical directories. This step is particularly helpful if you are really ignorant of the subject matter.

##### Part Three: Read and Think

6. Read, always focusing on the specific research question, but taking time to further educate yourself about the topic in general. Take notes. Document carefully so you do not accidentally plagiarize when you write the first draft. Index notes to specific topics. Perhaps use special software to manage and retrieve notes.
7. While reading, analyze (i.e., identify and isolate basic arguments and lines of evidence others have used.)
8. While reading, **think critically**. What is true, and how do we know it is true? This is the heart of the process. Evaluate the evidence and logic and overall argument used by each source. Consult cited primary sources yourself to verify evidence. Pay attention to both the big picture and the small details as needed.
9. Formulate conclusion and thesis statement. Synthesize and organize an argument to support it. Continue to **think critically**.

##### Part Four: Write and Think

10. Decide how you want to present the material to a particular audience to support your thesis. This is your rhetorical strategy and it may involve considerable creativity in how you frame or present your argument. Do not blindly follow the outline you used to guide your study and note taking about the research question. Do write a new outline which focuses on the thesis.

11. Compose draft. Present the truth as you understand it, being careful to evaluate all significant views fairly. Be logical. Document thoroughly and accurately as you write, not as an afterthought. Continue to **think critically**.
12. Evaluate your work. Does the draft as a whole hang together and present a coherent argument for the thesis? Does each section advance the goal? Is it persuasive? Remember you are not just summarizing what you read; you are advancing a persuasive case to support a specific conclusion. Rewrite as needed, even if you must reorganize or add new evidence and arguments.
13. Edit for cohesion and accuracy. Polish and format.

URIM is based on the literature search model of research. It calls for thoughtful reading, careful understanding of sources, and honest consideration of a wide range of evidence and views. Everything is geared to help the researcher interact with scholarly literature and critically evaluate each viewpoint. Often this means weighing conflicting contradictory evidence and, if possible, identifying a viewpoint that reasonably accounts for all evidence. Although URIM involves gathering and sifting information, the goal is not thoughtless collection of footnotes and quotations, or thoughtless regurgitation of what one has read. Information-gathering is a means, not the ends, and judicious, thoughtful, critical assessment of views and evidence is central. Communication is also important. URIM is designed to help the researcher produce a cogent and well documented argument for a specific thesis, including fair assessment of evidence and arguments for and against the thesis.

### *URIM EVALUATED*

URIM has some obvious virtues. It is conceptually and practically simple. It provides a starting point and a procedure to follow. It is applicable to a wide range of topics and disciplines. It stresses critical thinking. URIM is a good way for a student to learn about a topic and to think through an issue. You have probably followed a procedure much like URIM many times during your academic career. URIM has a place in graduate studies and it can even be used with profit by mature scholars, although it was clearly designed for students and their needs.

URIM has its proper role, but URIM is a poor guide for **original** research. Why so? 1) It looks for pre-existing answers in secondary literature. Pre-existing means not original. 2) It assumes a false linear process of inquiry. 3) It is a fixed recipe, an inflexible algorithmic approach to research. 4) It ignores the role of expertise and domain-specific problem solving techniques, and instead caters to generic research techniques.

#### ***URIM LOOKS FOR PRE-EXISTING ANSWERS IN SECONDARY LITERATURE***

URIM assumes the literature search model of research. It is based on finding pre-existing answers in secondary literature. It is the way to sift views and identify “the best known answer.” URIM is also a credible outline of how to do a critical literature review which shows strengths, weaknesses, and omissions in the scholarly literature. It even allows for the possibility of a creative synthesis which adapts and modifies prior views in small ways, although that is not its focus. However, it is not geared toward the scholar who is struggling to formulate an original and creative solution. It is not a guide to doing original research with primary sources. But making an original contribution based on primary source data is the *sine qua non* of real research. So URIM does not meet the primary researcher’s greatest needs.

#### ***URIM ASSUMES A LINEAR PROCESS OF INQUIRY***

URIM expects the researcher to proceed in a predetermined, smooth, linear progression from selection of topic, to compilation of bibliography, to reading, thinking, and writing. But most real research is characterized by false starts, revision, and cyclic refinement at every stage of work, not by smooth linear progression. Remember the hermeneutical circle! Research is rational but it is not linear.

#### ***URIM IS A FIXED RECIPE***

URIM is a recipe, an algorithm. Research is rational but it is not algorithmic. No prepackaged procedure, no generic recipe can control the research process. Research involves a complex non-deterministic

interplay of data, method, assumption, analysis, synthesis, cleverness, thoroughness, and luck. Research does not follow a fixed recipe, a deterministic algorithm.

### **URIM IGNORES THE ROLE OF EXPERTISE AND DOMAIN-SPECIFIC PROBLEM SOLVING TECHNIQUES**

URIM is a generic approach. URIM assumes hard work, clear thinking, and generic research techniques are sufficient. But URIM does not describe what expert researchers do. Expert original researchers almost invariably depend very heavily on their knowledge of the specific problem and on specialized disciplinary methods, models, theories, and canons of evidence. Generic research method is not the key. This issue merits fuller development, so I will 1) explain what is meant by a generic problem solving technique, 2) explain what is meant by a domain-specific or subject-specific technique, and 3) describe how experts use domain-specific techniques to solve many research problems. I believe this will help you see why a generic approach like URIM does not describe original research although it does describe a part of what original researchers do.

#### *GENERIC PROBLEM SOLVING*

I'm going to assume that generic research method is just a generic problem solving technique. Studies in cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence have identified generic problem solving methods used by both scholars and practitioners in a multitude of fields from physics to philosophy. But these same studies have demonstrated that generic methods are inherently weak.<sup>1</sup> Specialized disciplinary (domain-specific<sup>2</sup>) methods tend to be more powerful.

What does a generic method look like? The best known is means-ends analysis. The solver moves toward a final solution by setting up subgoals, each of which is a means toward the final end. This involves breaking complex problems into smaller parts. Other well known general problem solving approaches and tactics include working backwards, using qualitative representations (e.g., conceptual diagrams), trial and error, solving special cases before solving the general case, working with analogous problems, and using self-management techniques (e.g. self-questioning like "Why am I doing this?")

Mature scholars and researchers do use general/generic problem solving techniques. They especially use general approaches when they are faced with atypical, novel or anomalous problems. The expert researcher who is struggling with an anomaly partly resembles a novice in the way he works. Both expert and novice struggle with false starts and circular procedures. Both rely on intuition, trial and error, etc. But domain-specific knowledge plays a very big role for the expert even when very general problem solving approaches are used. The specialized and the generic work together.

#### *DOMAIN-SPECIFIC PROBLEM SOLVING*

What does a domain-specific problem solving method look like? Here are a couple of examples.

Let's start with something very simple and very familiar. Every seminarian learns a technique for doing NT lexical analysis. In simplest form it goes like this.

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<sup>1</sup> D. N. Perkins and Gabriel Salomon ("Are Cognitive Skills Context-Bound," *Educational Researcher* 18 [1989]: 16-25) provide a brief but excellent introductory survey of research into general problem solving methods and the role of domain-specific knowledge in problem solving. They advocate a balanced and nuanced view that recognizes both the value of general thinking skills and the essential role of domain-specific knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> "Domain" in this context refers to more than subject matter. It includes [distinctive] goals, methods, models, canons of evidence, and standards of performance used by its experts as well as subject matter. This sometimes implies what might be called sub-disciplines. "Palestinian archaeology" is an example. The discipline/domain of expertise can be construed as narrowly or as broadly as needed to serve the problem at hand: Pauline studies; NT studies; Biblical studies; Christian theology, etc. We do not need a perfect definition of "domain" to understand the general point. But we do need to realize that domain means more than just subject matter. All of *Second Century* 1 (1981) is devoted to a debate of whether NT studies constitutes a unified domain/discipline or a suite of allied domains/disciplines. It shows how scholars can construe both broadly and narrowly depending on the agenda.

- Theory says every word normally has a broad semantic field, not a single meaning, and this semantic field can be discovered by simply looking at examples of how the word is used. NT Greek is largely secular Koine, and uses the stock lexicon.
- This theory suggests a certain procedure. First describe the entire semantic field of a word by studying many uses of the word and categorizing these examples. Note meaning may vary with literary genre, audience, date, and author. Then determine how the word is used in the particular context you are studying.
- Apply standard canons of evidence to this procedure. For example, etymology is a poor guide to meaning. Pre-Christian Koine examples of usage are a good guide to possible NT meaning but examples far distant in time (classical period) are weaker evidence. Examples from the NT itself or from the same NT author are stronger still. Hundreds if not thousands of uses of a word may be necessary to represent the full semantic field. Remember to treat full phrases not just words in isolation. Allow for pregnant or technical uses of the words. A passage with synonymous or antithetical parallelism may provide a strong indication of how a word is used. Grammar and lexical meaning interact. Meaning may reside in the context that is not part of the meaning of the word *per se*. Do not read the entire context into the word. I suppose we could list 100 rules that apply here.

The point I am making is that there is a theory, a procedure and canons of evidence. Every seminarian learns this package; it is part of the very first course in exegesis.<sup>3</sup> Experts use domain-specific knowledge like this as part of their problem solving strategies.

Let's look at a second example of domain-specific problem solving, this time from the field of ANE comparative studies.<sup>4</sup> ANE discoveries sometimes contain striking similarities to (and differences from) biblical accounts. You are familiar with many examples. ANE texts have been used to illuminate the creation accounts, the Flood narratives, covenant structure, biblical law codes, specific practices like Abraham's "sister-wife" lies, details of vocabulary and grammar, specific historical events, etc. You are also familiar with false or at least unsupported claims some mature scholars have made when they failed to follow basic rules and canons of evidence in using these sources (e.g. misuse of Babylonian sources by Friedrich Delitzsch, of Ugaritic tablets by Dahood, of Nuzi texts by Speiser, etc.)

Let's review some of the canons of evidence applicable to ANE comparative studies.

- Do not trust a single text; it is best to have multiple texts from multiple sites and time periods.
- Be very cautious about arguing from lack of ANE parallels; asserting the OT is "unique" may be arguing from silence.
- Superficial similarity does not prove deep similarity. Study both OT context and ANE context to show a custom or word has the same meaning in two different cultures. Similarity in some details does not prove similarity between whole systems.
- Note differences, not just similarities.
- Do not use a poorly understood feature of one culture to illuminate a poorly understood feature of another culture.
- A parallel from a distant culture/period is weak evidence.
- Do not compare apples with oranges. For example, do not compare one genre with another, like law with narrative.
- It is dangerous to date from customs or genre. At a minimum, you must have evidence from both previous and succeeding time periods. You must have extensive evidence, not just a few examples. Remember ANE documents had editions and revisions with different dates, and ideas existed earlier than the documents.

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<sup>3</sup> So students are typically exposed to textbooks like Stanley E. Porter, ed., *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament* (New York: Brill, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> What is the comparative method as applied to ANE/OT studies? There are two main variations. 1. *Historical comparison*. Similarities and differences between societies which belong to the same cultural context or historical stream are used to help us understand specific elements in the OT. This approach assumes that one culture influenced another or that both had common influences, and that ideas, rites, and customs spread. 2. *Typological comparison*. Similarities and differences between societies far apart in time or space are used to help us understand *universals*, which are then in turn applied to specific elements in the OT, etc. This approach is sometimes associated with functionalist or structuralist anthropology.

So there are generally accepted canons of evidence that every student of the OT learns. A domain-specific approach to problem solving makes use of domain-specific knowledge like this.

#### *EXPERT PROBLEM SOLVING*

Experts usually solve problems using a disciplinary pool of standard methods, models, procedures, and canons of evidence. Novices are unfamiliar or at least unskillful with these procedures, models, etc. Expertise consists more in knowledge than in native genius or clever use of generic problem solving methods. Experts possess vast disciplinary knowledge that enables them to quickly recognize and categorize problems and to systematically work forward to solutions. Novices struggle not because they are dumb, not because they know nothing of general methods, but because they lack knowledge about the particular subject area or the particular kind of problem.

Knowledge is the single most important factor governing the work of experts when they solve problems. Of course general intelligence, persistence, luck, appropriate use of general problem solving methods, and many other factors also play important roles in research and problem solving. Subject knowledge is not the only factor.

Now the main point is this: at the broadest level, original research strategy is informed by, shaped by, even controlled by domain-specific knowledge. URIM ignores the crucial role of domain-specific knowledge and expertise. URIM does not describe how expert researchers research. Specialized disciplinary knowledge, methods, models, theories, and canons of evidence should be foremost. A generic approach cannot be domain-specific, much less problem-specific. URIM does not represent the broad pattern of real original research.